

Lewin, Michael: Das System der Ideen. Zur perspektivistisch-metaphilosophischen Begründung der Vernunft im Anschluss an Kant und Fichte, Freiburg/München: Alber 2021, 378 pp.

Analytical table of contents (pp. 11-19): [Link](#).

Book: [Link](#).

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Précis

Abstract

The book (I) deals systematically with a conception of reason that creates and deploys ‘ideas’ as pure representations of something that is not or only partially given in experience. This conception—developed in Kant’s *Transcendental Dialectic*, unfolded throughout his works and set as the highest point in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*—is the most important key to understanding transcendental philosophy and classical German philosophy. Moreover, the book (II) argues that the set of theories regarding reason ‘in the narrower sense’ (the faculty of ideas) constitutes a research program that can be developed further and compete / cooperate with alternate projects (theories of rationality and reasonability) in contemporary contexts; it can also be successfully defended against Pyrrhonical objections and the post-idealistic critique of reason.

(I) (a) Kant

In its first part—in the context of recent literature on Kant’s account of reason in the narrower sense (especially related to the *Transcendental Dialectic* (e.g., Klimmek (2005), Bunte (2016) etc. up to Willaschek (2018) and Meer (2019)) as well as to the question if there is an overarching account of ‘ideas’ in Kant (see König (1994))—the book offers an analysis of *seven types* of ideas in Kant, their immanent functions in guiding the will and the understanding in different domains of reason’s activity and their epistemological, ontological and propositional status. This results in a table of ideas and their functions which is more complete and diversified than the first attempt to give such an overview by C. C. E. Schmid in his *Wörterbuch zum leichtern Gebrauch der Kantischen Schriften* (1798) and, for example, the overview in the recent Kant-Lexikon (2015). Given the discovered multifaceted functionality of the *seven types* of ideas, the problem of the unity of reason reappears on the level of the purest form of spontaneity—this level is not or only partially considered in the debates that either address the

question of the unity of reason in a wider sense or the unity of the system that follows from reason (e.g. as discussed in the book, in Horkheimer (1925), Beck (1960), Konhardt (1979), Prauss (1981), Picht (1985), Hiltcher (1987), Neiman (1994), Freudiger (1996), Kleingeld (1998), Bickmann (2002), Moskopp (2009), Klemme (2012), and Krijnen (2016)). The unity of ‘reason in the narrower sense’ as a faculty of mind is possible since it uses representations with similar features, ideas, in different areas of reason’s activity. Therefore, there are different functions and uses of ideas which are all governed by one faculty. Pure reason in the narrower sense is itself an idea for Kant—he calls this idea ‘pure thinking’, ‘pure will’, ‘pure spontaneity’, ‘causality’, ‘freedom’, ‘pure self-activity’ (*reine (Selbst-)Tätigkeit*), and ‘the actual I’ (*das eigentliche Ich*).

(I) (b) Fichte

The book takes up on the interpretation of Fichte’s first principle as pure practical reason in Kant’s sense in Schmidt (2004) and Stolzenberg (2018) and (2010). However, against the backdrop of the analysis of the unity of reason *qua* faculty of ideas, the pure practical reason is already an applied side of the purest form of spontaneity—as operating with the practical ideas (the moral law, wisdom, virtue, social contract, the highest good etc.) and the postulates. Fichte’s starting point is rather the act by which pure reason abstracts from its possible applications to something other than itself and creates an ‘idea of reason’ (*genitivus subiectivus and obiectivus*)—i.e. pure reason creates the purest representation of pure reason. The technical term for this mental operation is the ‘fact-act’ or ‘self-positing’, which involves—as most clearly shown in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* 1798/99—(α) a spontaneous act of the creating of the concept of pure reason, (β) an immediate consciousness (intellectual intuition) of this act, (γ) a product of this act (pure concept, i.e. idea, which he calls ‘reason’, ‘the absolute I’, ‘the I’, ‘pure self-activity’, ‘freedom’, ‘intelligence’ etc.), and (δ) a faculty that made this act possible (i.e. the pure reason). To perform such an act by the ‘uppermost’ faculty, reason mobilizes and activates or abstracts from all other ‘lower’ acts of consciousness, corresponding faculties, and conditions which are genetically deduced in relation to the fact-act. The book shows that the idea of reason is the starting point both in the early and the later *Wissenschaftslehre*—the interpreters either underdetermine the first principle, understanding the highest point in the early Fichte as an abstract self-consciousness (from Henrich (1966) to Dürr (2018)) or (merely) pure practical reason; or overdetermine it, putting forward mystic interpretations of the later Fichte, claiming that God is the final unity of the self-consciousness (as Henrich (1982) and Gloy (1998)), or the *ratio essendi* of knowledge (Rivera de Rosales

(2016)), or that Fichte goes back to Plato and the Neoplatonists. Asmuth (2003) and (2006) claims that Fichte—although he did not read much of Plato—adapts and improves on Plato’s doctrine of ideas. The book argues that all these and similar interpretations are a result of a gap in the Kant research: the *broad* systematic account of ideas of reason and their immanent functions. Fichte, however, does not only distinguish strictly empirical and pure concepts of the understanding from the ideas of reason in the narrower sense—he deduces them in the same way as categories and other products of the Kantian philosophy from the fact-act. The part on Fichte ends with a description of Fichte’s deduction of ideas of reason. All seven kinds of ideas that can be encountered in Kant are deduced and ordered by a transcendental subject-object-symbolism and five spheres of reason’s activity (*Wirkungssphären*). Fichte was, after the short dictionary entry by Schmid (1798), the last to order and systematize Kant’s broad account of ideas of reason.

(II) (a) Reason as a Research Program

In the second part of the book, I argue that the seven types of ideas in Kant and their deduction in Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* constitute a ‘set of theories’. A set of theories—if it is more than a loose and arbitrary accumulation of thoughts—is also called a ‘research program’. The question if reason as a faculty of ideas can be conceived as a well-grounded theoretical enterprise must therefore concern the whole structure of the set of theories. Imre Lakatos’ methodology (1968, 1970/1978) offers a systematic description of research programs—their setup and the logic of their development, progression and degeneration—that was already deployed in religious studies (Murphy (1999); see also Reeves (2011) and Russel (2017)), literary studies (Black (2003)) and economics (Backhouse (1998)). Other than it was proposed by Schnädelbach (1994), Apel (2011), Habermas (2016), and recently also Gakis (2016) and Hartmann (2020), I regard ‘paradigm’ as a constrained (and rationally unjust) category that cannot give an accurate picture of the practice of philosophical research. Philosophy rather consists of co-existing, collaborating and competing research programs, and reason in the narrower sense is one of them, subordinated to the set of theories ‘transcendental philosophy’ with its specific ‘hard core’, ‘protective belt’ and ‘positive / negative heuristics’. I programmatically reconstruct reason in the narrower sense and competing concepts of reason *qua* rationality and reasonability and reveal their background parameters that lead to different grounding and further development strategies. Although ‘reason in the narrower sense’ is a degenerating research program, it has enough explanatory power to progress theoretically and maybe even partly empirically: I offer several ways and problem shifts.

(II) (b) The ‘Reflected Perspectivism’ and the Grounding of Reason

Just as the philosophers of science purport to reveal the logic of research, primarily of natural scientists, the philosophers of philosophy can uncover and rationally reconstruct the logic of philosophical endeavors. Philosophy—through the lens of the Lakatosian methodology—consists of a plurality of collaborating and competing research programs with different sets of research-programmatic determinations. To be successfully applied to philosophy and render a better understanding of philosophical research practice with its idiosyncratic plurality of methods and topics, the Lakatosian methodology must be updated. It should include the analysis of two additional factors: research goals and demands. Each philosophical program has its specific area and direction of research towards a (knowledge) goal and is governed by specific demands. Demands are certain imperatives—tasks and requirements that a researcher or a theory should meet. For example, a complete theory of mind as a research goal requires a systematic philosophical approach, a radical critique of systematicity in philosophy is a result of a different (knowledge) goal. The (a) research-programmatic determinations, (b) demands and (c) (knowledge) goals constitute the perspectivity (the boundedness, situatedness, and limits) of a philosophical research program, and provoke clashes with programs with different (a), (b), and (c). A metaphilosophical position based on the analysis of this philosophical perspectivity, on a constant reflection upon these factors, can be called ‘reflected perspectivism’. A rationally just philosophical practice and the problem of grounding of reason must involve reflection upon (a), (b), and (c).

In the final part of the book, I argue that claims that reason is (theoretical grounding) and ought to be (practical grounding) can be successfully justified via at least three different strategies: (1) faculty-appearance-relatedness, (2) coherency and (3) interrelatedness of worldviews (Fichte). I confront these strategies with objections from (I) the five tropes of Agrippa and (II) postmodern *topoi* of the radical critique of reason—(i) non-attractivity of reason ((a) the progress-related and (b) the paradigmatic *argumentum ad populum*), (ii) reason and misuse of power ((a) the taking of power, (b) the instrumentality of reason), (iii) the ‘other’ of reason and (iv) intersubjectivity ((a) in general and (b) *qua* methodological lack of intersubjectivity)—and show how these objections are based on misunderstandings, illegitimate replacements of demands, and absolutizations of one’s own (a) research-programmatic determinations, (b) demands, and (c) (knowledge) goals.

Hence, I suggest—what seems to me the best approach to differences in (philosophical) views—a metaphilosophical / reflected perspectivism.

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